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ABSTRACT

This study replicates earlier research on student activism, but within the context of a non-elite and relatively apolitical university campus, namely, Bowling Green University. A basic finding of the earlier research is that student activists represent an extension of parental values rather than a generational rebellion. This paper tests the parental continuity hypothesis for the less radicalized student protestors at Bowling Green. Three indicators of student-parent continuity were used: (1) political party preferences; (2) political orientations; and (3) perceived generation gap with parents. The findings show that, on all 3 indicators, student protestors were more likely to be divergent from their parents. It is concluded that the generational continuity explanation is not applicable to rank and file protestors at an apolitical university. (Author/TL)

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Participation in Anti-War Demonstrations: A Test of the Parental Continuity Hypothesis*

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Most of the empirical research on student protest has focused on the nation's finest colleges and universities, as well as on the most committed activists. For example, Somers[1] and Watts and Whittaker[2] studied the Free Speech Movement at Berkeley; Flacks[3] investigated the anti-draft demonstrators at the University of Chicago, and Keniston[4] the anti-war protestors at Yale. These studies yield a relatively consistent profile of highly committed activists on elite campuses, but their findings may be problematic for the "rank and file" demonstrators attending relatively apolitical schools.[5]

Although the popular literature has emphasized the role of macro-societal factors in producing student activism, the social scientific literature has focused on personality variables and family background characteristics.[6] Several studies have reported a marked continuity between the political beliefs and value orientations of student activists and their parents. For example, research using party preference as an indicator of parents' political orientation shows that student activists are likely to have Democratic or Socialist parents whereas non-activists tend to come from Republican families.[7] Flacks suggests that student activism is related to a general humanistic value orientation shared by both student activists and their parents. His findings indicate that "activists and their parents tend to place greater stress on involvement in intellectual and esthetic pursuits, humanitarian concerns, opportunity for self-expression, and tend to de-emphasize or positively disvalue personal achievement, conventional morality and conventional religiosity."[8]

In short, the literature attempts to explain student activism in terms of an extension of parental values and beliefs rather than as a form of generational rebellion.

The objective of the present paper is to re-examine the generational continuity hypothesis within the context of a relatively apolitical, non-elite university. More specifically, we analyze the differential participation of Bowling Green students in anti-war demonstrations with an emphasis on continuity in political orientations between the students and their parents.

RESEARCH PROCEDURES

The events of May 1970 precipitated a crisis at many universities throughout the nation. At Bowling Green State University, student reaction to the Cambodian invasion and student killings at Kent and Jackson State Universities took the form of anti-war demonstrations, a moratorium from classes, teach-ins, and a sit-in at the office of the university president. This period of intense activity culminated in the formal institution of a Free University that was to continue the remainder of the school year.

The data reported in this paper were collected as part of a study of the Free University on Bowling Green's main campus. Information was collected during the May crisis period by means of a self-administered, anonymous questionnaire that was distributed on an availability basis to students in regular and Free University classes, dormitories, Greek houses, and the student health center. Commuter and off-campus students were reached through a mailed questionnaire. A total of 716 usable questionnaires were accumulated in this manner. In short we have a

non-probability sample which, although not permitting point estimates and inferential statistics, does contain considerable variance in student backgrounds, attitudes, and behaviors.[9]

In this study we operationally defined student protestors as those respondents reporting themselves as having participated either in (1) an anti-war protest at the state capitol, (2) an anti-war protest at Washington, D.C., or (3) having participated in the sit-in at the office of the university president. Clearly, this definitional net would include some protestors with only a minimum of political commitment. Consequently, our sample of protestors would not be representative of the more radicalized and committed activists who were studied in earlier research at elite universities.

FINDINGS

As indicated above, previous research suggests that activism represents neither conversion from nor rebellion against the political perspectives of parents. Flacks[10] found that student activists are generally trying to fulfill and renew the liberal political traditions of their families. This interpretation contends that demonstrators are socialized into a humanistic subculture such that the values espoused by the parents are transformed into personality traits in the student generation.

Similarity of political party preferences has been used as one index of continuity between the generations of parents and students. Comparison of party labels used by students in describing themselves and their parents is obviously a crude measure of generational continuity. Students identifying themselves as Republicans, for example, could be either more liberal or conservative than their parents. With these limitations in

mind, Table 1 reports our findings concerning continuity of party preferences between students and parents as related to participation in anti-war demonstrations. To some extent, the data are inconsistent with the generational continuity hypothesis. The highest percentage of protestors (22 per cent) is found among students who labeled themselves as Democrats and their parents as Republican. As might be expected, none of the students who described themselves as Republican and their parents as Democrats participated in the anti-war protests. Those respondents who identified themselves and their parents as Democrats occupied an intermediate position in rates of participation in the demonstrations (13 per cent). In any case, the percentage differences are not particularly large between any of the criterion groups; this is probably due to the grossness of party preference as an indicator of political orientation.

(Table 1 about here)

For this reason, we refined our measure of political continuity between students and parents by asking the respondents to describe their own political orientation as well as their parents' position in terms of a five-point checklist—radical left, highly liberal, moderately liberal, moderately conservative, and highly conservative.[11] Students who described themselves using a political label indicating a more conservative or liberal orientation than the labels they applied to their parents were classified as "more conservative" or "more liberal" than their parents. Similarly, students who applied the same labels to themselves and their parents were classified as "equally liberal" or "equally conservative." The measure thus reflects the student's <u>perception</u> of whether his political position is similar to that of his parents.

The students' comparison of themselves with both of their parents is shown in Table 2.[12] The largest percentage of protestors is found among students who believe they are more liberal than their parents (18 per cent). The smallest percentage of protestors is in the category of students who are equally conservative as their parents. The students who saw themselves as more conservative than their parents were too few for analysis as a discrete category (only 9 cases). The finding that the highest proportion of protestors is found among the "rebels to the left" was unaffected by the introduction of socio-economic status as a control variable.

(Table 2 about here)

Also in connection with the generational continuity line of reasoning, we attempted a preliminary test of the role of a "generation gap" as a concomitant of student activism. If it is assumed that activists are raised in a supportive and humanistic family environment, one can hypothesize that student protestors would be less likely to report a generation gap with their parents than would non-protestors. Table 3 describes the students' perception of the relative mutual understanding between them and their parents as related to participation in the anti-war demonstrations. No attempt was made to camouflage the measurement of generation gap with our self-conscious sample.[13] Table 3 reveals a definite tendency for student protestors to report a greater generation gap with their parents than the non-protestors. For example, among those who report substantial misunderstanding with their fathers, 18 per cent participated in the anti-war demonstrations as compared to 13 per cent of the respondents indicating a moderate degree of misunderstanding, and only 8 per cent of those reporting "no generation gap at all" with their

fathers participated in the collective protests. The findings with regard to students reporting a generation gap with their mothers are virtually identical to those concerning their fathers (respective gammas of .27 and .28).

(Table 3 about here)

Introducing controls for sex and socioeconomic status does not appreciably alter the percentage distributions of Table 3; however, controlling for political ideology of the students does substantially alter the results.[14] As shown in Table 4, the relationship between a perceived generation gap and participation in collective protests is specific to students holding relatively moderate political attitudes. Among the political moderates, 19 per cent of the students expressing a strong generation gap were anti-war protestors, whereas 12 per cent of those indicating somewhat of a generation gap and 7 per cent of those reporting no generation gap participated in the demonstrations. Students with either left-wing or right-wing attitudes can not be differentiated as protestors or non-protestors on the basis of their degree of mutual understanding with their parents; apparently, their decision whether or not to protest is based on their more extreme and firmly held political attitudes. The vast majority of right-wing students did not participate in the demonstrations even though they reported considerable generational discontinuity in terms of mutual understanding.

(Table 4 about here)

The data shown in Table 4 are also relevant to Keniston's[15] supposition that generational continuity is especially significant for consistency or transference between leftist political beliefs and dissident behavior. In this connection Keniston cites Cowdry's research on anti-war

protestors at Yale; Cowdry found that the student most likely to hold radical beliefs and act on them is identified with a humanitarian and expressive father; whereas, conversely, the student most likely to hold radical beliefs but not act on them is one who sees himself as humanitarian and expressive but who has developed this self-characterization in reaction against his father. The data in Table 4 do not support this line of reasoning. Among the left-wing students, the reported degree of mutual understanding with their fathers is almost identical for protestors and non-protestors.

CONCLUSION AND SUMMARY

Our basic objective was to replicate some earlier research on student activism but within the context of a non-elite and relatively apolitical university campus. Several of the earlier studies of highly committed activists at more prestigious universities yielded consistent support for Flacks' contention that student activism represents an extension of parental political values rather than an expression of a generational rebellion.

Protest demonstrations have diffused to a large number of universities.[16] As the student movement emerges on less prestigious campuses, demonstrators are increasingly likely to be recruited from a wider spectrum of society than previously.[17] In 1967 Derber and Flacks[18] predicted that activists would be drawn from a greater variety of family backgrounds and that family background will be a less and less powerful predictor of participation in collective protests. Dunlap's[19] recent work is consistent with this general expectation. The research reported by Jansen et. al.[20] again suggests that family background variables are becoming less powerful predictors of student activism.

Our data are generally inconsistent with the hypothesis that student demonstrators hold political beliefs similar to those of their parents. First of all, the data show that students who identified themselves as Democrats and their parents as Republicans were more likely to have participated in the anti-war demonstrations than those who labeled both themselves and their parents as Democrats. Moreover, those students who participated in the anti-war demonstrations perceived themselves as more politically liberal than their parents. Finally, our data indicate that students reporting little misunderstanding with their parents were less likely to participate in anti-war demonstrations than those who reported a substantial generation gap. In addition, our study lends little support to Keniston's contention that left-wing protestors experience more mutual understanding with their parents than left-wing students who are not active participants in collective demonstrations.

It is probable that the parents of Bowling Green students represent a broader political spectrum than the parents of students from elite universities. In this regard there is a greater likelihood of student-parental discontinuity than in more prestigeful universities where a "ceiling effect" may operate to limit the degree of student political discontinuity from their leftist parents. Thus, the generational continuity hypothesis may not be valid when extended to the non-elite universities.

We can not say whether the background of student demonstrators from our campus has changed over the last few years with the evolution of student activism, but our data do clearly suggest that the family socialization hypothesis is not an adequate explanation of student activism at Bowling Green. Rather, it appears that peer group influence and

campus subcultures are becoming more important agents in the political socialization of student demonstrators.

Table I

Participation in Anti-War Demonstrations By Generational Continuity in Political Party Preferences

Student-Parent Political Parties	Protestors Per Cent	Non-Protestors Per Cent	N
Student Democrat, Parents Republican	22	78	32
Student Third Party, Parents Democrat	22	78	45
Student Third Party, Parents Republican	16	84	93
Student Democrat, Parents Democrat	13	87	122
Student Third Party, Parents Third Party	9	91	44
Student Republican, Parents Republican	5	95	139

Table II

Participation in Anti-War Demonstrations By
Generational Continuity in Political Orientations

Student-Parent Political Orientations	Protestors Per Cent	Non-Protestors Per Cent	N
Student More Liberal Than Parents	18	82	367
Student Equally Liberal As Parents	14	86	59
Student No Definite Political Position	9	93	129
Parents No Definite Political Position	5	95	20
Student Equally Conservative As Parents	3	97	124

Table III

Participation in Anti-War Demonstrations By
Perceived Generation Gap With Parents

Generation Gap With Father	Protestors Per Cent	Non-Protestors Per Cent	N
Strong	18	82	131
Moderate	13	87	349
None	8	92	187
	gamma = .27		
Generation Gap With Mother			
Strong	19	81	82
Moderate	15	85	372
None	9	91	233
	gamma = .28		

Table IV

Participation in Anti-War Demonstrations By Perceived Generation Gap With Father, Controlling For Political Ideology

	Left-Wing			Moderates			Right-Wing		
	Protestors	Non-Protestors Per Cent	N	Protestors	Non-Protestors Per Cent	N	Protestors	Non-Protestors Per Cent	N
Generation Gap With Father									
Strong	20	80	(30)	19	81	(68)	4	96	(26)
Moderate	21	79	(75)	12	88	(174)	6	94	(85)
None	21	79	(29)	9	91	(81)	2	98	(65)

FOOTNOTES

*The authors are members of the Sociology Department at Bowling Green State University. They gratefully acknowledge financial support from the Office of the Vice President of Student Affairs, Bowling Green State University. [redacted].

[1]R. H. Somers, "The Mainsprings of the Rebellion: A Survey of Berkeley Students in November, 1964," in S. Lipset and S. Wolin (Eds.), The Berkeley Student Revolt (Garden City: Doubleday, 1965).

[2]William A. Watts and David Whittaker, "Free Speech Advocates at Berkeley," Journal of Applied Behavioral Science, 2 (January, 1966), 41-61.

[3]Richard Flacks, "The Liberated Generation: An Exploration of the Roots of Student Protest," Journal of Social Issues, 23 (July, 1967), 52-75.

[4]Kenneth Keniston, "The Sources of Student Dissent," Journal of Social Issues, 23 (July, 1967), 108-137.

[5]Riley Dunlap, "Radical and Conservative Student Activists: A Comparison of Family Backgrounds," Pacific Sociological Review," 13 (Summer, 1970), 171-181. Roger Kahn, "Rank and File Student Activism: A Contextual Test of Three Hypotheses," paper read at the American Sociological Association Meeting, San Francisco, August, 1969.

[6]Richard Flacks, op. cit., Kenneth Keniston, op. cit., Edward E. Sampson, "Student Activism and the Decade of Protest," Journal of Social Issues, 23 (July, 1967), 1-33. Frederic Solomon and Jacob Fishman, "Youth and Peace: A Psycho-Social Study of Student Peace Demonstrators in Washington, D.C.," Journal of Social Issues, 20 (October 1964), 54-73. William A. Watts, Steve Lynch, and David Whittaker, "Alienation and Activism in Today's College-Age Youth: Socialization Patterns and Current Family Relationships," Journal of Counseling Psychology, 16 (January, 1969), 1-7. David L. Westby and Richard G. Braungart, "Class and Politics in the Family Backgrounds of Student Political Activists," American Sociological Review, 31 (October, 1966), 690-692.

[7]Dunlap, op. cit., Flacks, op. cit., Westby and Braungart, op. cit.

[8]Flacks, op. cit., 68.

[9]We compared our sample to the university population as described in the registrar's records. The comparison indicated that our sample was very representative with the exception of an over-representation of sophomores.

[10]Flacks, op. cit.

[11]The political labels listed on the questionnaire were the same as those used by Middleton and Putney, with the exception of substituting "radical left" for "Socialist"; see Russell Middleton and Snell Putney, "Student Rebellion Against Parental Political Beliefs," Social Forces, 41 (May, 1963), 377-383.

[12]The procedures used in classifying a student's political orientation relative to his parents are described in Middleton and Putney, op. cit.

[13]The questionnaire item used to operationalize generation gap was worded as follows:

> Which of the following statements best describes the degree of mutual understanding between you and your parents at the present time?

	With Father	With Mother
No generation gap at all	___	___
Somewhat of a generation gap	___	___
Very much of a generation gap	___	___

[14]Political ideology was quantified by using empirical breaking points on Christie's New Left Scale; see John Robinson and Phillip Shaver, Measures of Social Psychological Attitudes (Ann Arbor: Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan, 1969), 386-391.

[15]Kenneth Keniston, "Notes on Young Radicals," Change in Higher Education, 1 (November-December, 1969), 25-33.

[16]Special Committee on Campus Tensions, Campus Tensions: Analysis and Recommendations (Washington: American Council on Education, 1970), page 7.

[17]Dunlap, op. cit.

[18]Charles Derber and Richard Flacks, "An Exploration of the Value System of Radical Student Activists and Their Parents." Paper read at the American Sociological Association Meeting, San Francisco, August, 1967.

[19]Dunlap, op. cit.

[20]David Jansen, Bob B. Winborn, and William Martinson, "Characteristics Associated with Campus Social-Political Action Leadership," Journal of Counseling Psychology, 15 (November, 1968), 552-562.